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Richard Cohen

Iannone: A Political Choice

Et tu, Hentoff? The liberal columnist, Nat Hentoff, has written a column [op-ed, July 8] accusing certain individuals and organizations of engaging in McCarthy and worse isms by opposing the nomination of Carol Iannone to the National Endowment for the Humanities' advisory council. In doing so, he joins George Will and Evans and Novak in raising the name of Iannone from obscurity to something of a battle cry. Oh, to be her literary agent.

At first blush, there seems to be much about the Iannone affair to commend itself to a liberal—especially one concerned with civil liberties. It's true the nominee is being criticized for her political views and that some of these criticisms have been intemperate. Iannone has either been called a racist or something in that neighborhood for daring to criticize the awards granted two particular black authors. A woman but no feminist, an academic but no liberal, Iannone is moreover a tough writer who takes no prisoners.

But it would be wrong to judge Iannone solely on the basis of some of her enemies and what some of them might have said. Instead, it would behoove everyone to consider that the NEH advisory board has two kinds of members and that Iannone is neither one. She lacks the credentials to sit on the NEH council as a scholar, and she is too much of a scholar to sit on the board as a layman. She was chosen for the very reason her supporters now say she is being opposed: politics. Such hypocrisy! I am, as usual, shocked.

Iannone is an academic, but barely—a nontenured adjunct professor at New York University. She has never published a book, and her writings have mostly been confined to such neoconservative journals as *Commentary*, the Schwab's drugstore of the right. It brought Jeane Kirkpatrick to the attention of Ronald Reagan, and it was Iannone's writings in that same magazine that piqued the interest of NEH chairman Lynne Cheney.

But one of those articles also made Iannone many enemies. The piece argued that certain literary awards were granted on the basis of race. She cited two books, Alice Walker's *"The Color Purple,"* which won the Pulitzer Prize, and Gloria Naylor's *"The Women of Brewster Place,"* which won the National Book Award. Iannone didn't think either book was all that hot.

In that same article, Iannone discussed "tribalism." This is a term used in reference to nations where positions are awarded on the basis of membership in a group. Lebanon comes to mind. There, certain government posts must go to Muslims while others must go to Christians. In New York, which has been tribalized almost as long as Lebanon, political tickets are forged in this manner.

Had Iannone confined her remarks to New York politics (or the anchors on local news shows), she might have proven her case. But the two books she cited were both greeted with rave reviews—"a consummately well-written novel," said *The New York Times* of *"The Color Purple."* It's one thing to differ with the award committees. It's quite another to attribute their judgment to "tribalism." Iannone may be right, but her supporting evidence is thin.

But if Iannone is guilty of using political standards to judge literary works, some of her critics have done no better. Iannone was denounced for her article and—in so many words—called a racist. A letter to Cheney from Joel Conarroe, a critic and president of the Guggenheim Foundation, likened her to Paul de Man, a literary scholar whose anti-semitic writings were discovered after his death. That's a charge with a fair amount of pungency.

I am in no position to evaluate Iannone's literary criticism, and I accept at face value the charge that some of her critics are politically motivated. But it's clear that Cheney didn't choose her on the basis of her academic credentials or her "distinguished record of service," which the NEH legislation requires. A politically conservative chairman chose a politically conservative nominee—a polemicist certain to make the generally liberal academic establishment gag. Had Iannone written brilliantly in defense of feminism (she's no feminist), Cheney would have looked elsewhere.

The morning line on Iannone is that her nomination is a goner. I doubt it. Cheney has made her a moving target, a scholar one minute, a layman the next, the center of a controversy in which the quality of her work is largely beside the point. Good thing, too. Cheney could have done better, but Iannone will do best of all. Thinly credentialed and admired mostly for her ideology and the enemies she's made, she can only win by losing—a best-selling book on how the libs did her in.